Chapter 3

The early life of Robert Portner, 1837-1860

> *Writing down my life history, I fulfill a long desire… The reason for writing is that my beloved children should know the story of their parents as my only duty in life is to educate my children to become able and good human beings, as the other things I wanted to obtain from life, I have reached with full satisfaction. I only want to send my children with good knowledge and education in life so that my family tree, which has been removed to America, will bear good branches and fruits.* Introduction to Robert Portner's memoirs

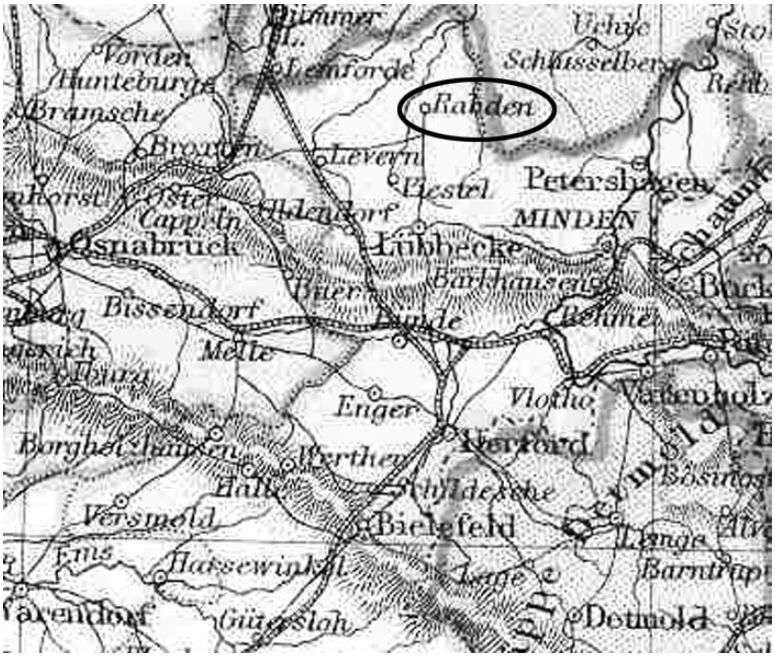
By the early 1850s the Portner family had fallen on hard times. Of humble origins,[1] the family had nonetheless become ensconced among the middle-class burghers of the medieval town of Rahden, in the northeast corner of Westphalia, by virtue of Heinrich Portner's service in the war against Napoleon. As a young man in the Prussian army under Field Marshal Blücher, Heinrich distinguished himself in battle. As a result, he was later given the position of court clerk in Rahden, a town whose economy depended mainly upon linen production and the grain raised on surrounding farms. A job in the government bureaucracy paid modestly, but Heinrich ultimately saved enough capital to open his own business. Thus financially secure, he married Henriette Gelcker, daughter of the local tax assessor. Her father bought them a house on the Mühlendamm ("Mill Dam"), one of the more respectable streets in the "Little Village" section of town, and they proceeded to have a large family of two daughters and six sons. Again because of Portner's many years of government service, at least some of his sons, including the sixth child, Robert, born March 20, 1837, were sent to the military school at Annaburg Castle in Saxony to be educated at the expense of Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV. (Portner n.d.:3; Tyler 1909:350; *The Western Brewer* June 1880; Kirchhoff 1995:106-107)

Busy at court, Heinrich left his business in the charge of his brother-in-law, August Gelcker. August, more skilled at practical jokes than at management, soon drove it into the ground. In 1845 the family had to sell nearly everything they owned to satisfy the debts and were thereafter forced to rely upon Heinrich's salary alone. At the time, most of the children had still not reached the age of majority. (Portner n.d.:3)

The situation only became bleaker. Heinrich passed away less than three years later, likely from cancer. The family managed as well as it could thereafter. Henriette Portner may have received financial assistance from her relatives, and her eldest son began a career in the army. A gunner in the Prussian artillery, he undoubtedly sent home some of his pay, but he was killed accidentally in war games, depriving Mrs. Portner of "a great help and support." (Portner n.d.:3)

[1] The name Pörtner (or its High German variant, Pförtner) means "porter" or "doorman," suggesting that an ancestor had had that humble occupation. (Sherwin 1999)

"Stone Street" and Saint John's Church in Rahden, Westphalia, 1907. Rahden City Archives.



A detail of an 1882 military map of the western part of the Prussian empire, including portions of the states of Westphalia, Lippe-Detmold, and Brunswick. Rahden, Westphalia is near the top center.

All this was occurring within the context of generally difficult times in the German states. Serious crop failures alternating with occasional bumper crops led to short food supplies and produced great privation in the countryside and towns. Taxes, which helped pay the salary of Heinrich Portner and for the education of his sons, were prohibitively high, a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars and aggravated by the trade barriers and redundancy of political administration in the petty states of Europe. Meanwhile, Germany and Austria, like much of Europe, were in the throes of political crises; revolutions and protest movements against the authoritarian monarchies were quickly and sometimes brutally suppressed in the early 1830s and in 1848. Many liberal and socialist dissidents were forced to flee to other countries. One result of these problems was a surge in emigration, especially to the United States. After 1820, 85 to 90 percent of all German emigrants sailed to American shores. During the decade following the revolution of 1848 alone, more than 1,000,000 Germans arrived in the U.S., principally seeking economic opportunity. This huge wave, which peaked in 1853-1854, consisted mainly of farmers and craftsmen motivated by overpopulation in rural areas. (Johnson 1997:207; Palmer and Colton 1978:451, 476-480; Holborn 1969:5-7, 14, 122-123; Miller and Faux 1997:97; Behr 1996:64)

Augusta, the eldest daughter of Heinrich and Augusta Portner, married Carl Augustus Strangmann, a native Hanoverian who had lived in New York City for a decade and there manufactured furniture and refined sugar.[2] One can only guess at the stories of exotic urban America with which Strangmann regaled his teenage brothers-in-law, firing their youthful imaginations. With conditions as they were at home, it is no wonder that the boys soon joined the multitudes of their countrymen crossing the Atlantic. The second oldest Portner son, Louis, born 1825, emigrated first, arriving in New York in 1848. He tried his hand at baking pies and selling liquor before removing to Williamsburg, Virginia, where he bought a small tobacco factory in 1854. Unsuccessful, he returned to New York shortly thereafter, again engaged in the liquor business and local politics, and died just before 1880. The next oldest, Hermann, followed, first working in Louis's pie bakery and then spending some time in Savannah, Georgia, where he contracted a fatal case of yellow fever. He died in a Staten Island hospital in 1854. (Portner n.d.:3-4; Genealogical Publishing Company 1906:169; United States Census 1870d; Trow 1853; Trow 1854; Wilson 1855; Wilson 1856; Wilson 1857; Wilson 1861; Wilson 1862; Trow 1879)

Despite the precariousness of business and even life in nineteenth-century America, it must have offered a brighter prospect than Germany, and this promise lured the younger Portner sons. Their hometown was a backwater with a population already leveled by emigration. Near the end of 1852 Louis and Hermann wrote to Carl and Robert, then about eighteen and sixteen years old, respectively, asking them to join him in New York. The older brothers included tickets for the passage, and so in 1853 the teenagers set out on the short journey from Rahden to the North Sea port of Bremen, where they embarked on the schooner *Amaranth*.[3] A family legend relates that while aboard ship, the young Robert tossed his few coins into the sea, vowing to begin a career in the United States without a *Pfennig* from the Old World and to succeed by dint of hard work

[2] That is to say, Carl Strangmann, Sr., the father of the man who would later serve as "C.E.O." of the Robert Portner Brewing Company.

[3] That year, the Rahden area suffered another bad harvest and outside speculation in grain that caused a food shortage among the poor. The town was forced to buy and distribute rye to the destitute. (Kirchhoff 1995:193)

alone. It is a charming but unlikely tale, uncharacteristic of the thrifty and practical future businessman. The boys landed June 27, 1853.[4] The ship manifest suggests that they intended to work for Louis, listing the occupations of these young men, just out of school, as bakers. Indeed, they stayed with and worked for Louis for several weeks. (Portner n.d.:4; Valaer 1969; Glazier and Filby 1989:171; Kirchhoff 1995:103,193)

In 1853 there was certainly no foretelling the future success of Robert Portner.[5] This teenage immigrant—five feet nine inches tall, with light blue eyes, light brown hair, and a fair complexion, who spoke only German and spent his first days in a new country elbow deep in pie dough—was in many ways no different from his peers, his brothers and millions of other Germans. Yet perhaps he *was* different. Well educated and ramrod straight from his five years at the Annaburg military academy, young Robert was gifted with considerable native intelligence and learning ability. Progressing from job to job, first as grocery clerk and then as a bookkeeper in a Brooklyn factory,[6] he quickly learned to speak, read and write English from interactions with Americans and from reading the New York papers. And he would soon develop considerable business acumen from his many small enterprises. (Portner n.d.:4; Department of State)

In the summer of 1855, Robert went south to Williamsburg, Virginia, where Louis had already set up his little tobacco products factory. Robert worked six months as a salesman. Then, taking his earnings and pawning the gold watch he inherited from his brother Hermann, he started his first business. It was essentially small-time tobacco wholesaling—buying cut plug and chewing tobacco, wrapping it in tin foil, and traveling around the countryside by wagon selling it to groceries and restaurants. He later claimed to have invented a new sort of cigarette paper at the time.[7] Robert earned about $3 a day, many times what he was making upon his arrival in the U.S. So successful was he, in fact, that Louis borrowed all of his savings to keep the factory going. Robert then decided to take on a partner who offered $150 in capital and a chance to divide the labor. The partner turned out to be an alcoholic, however, and sold little. Discouraged, Robert walked away from the enterprise and returned to New York broke—one of his first hard lessons in business. (Portner n.d.:4-5; *Manassas Journal* June 1, 1906)

At the beginning of 1856, Robert Portner returned to the grocery where he had started out, but was not satisfied with his $15 monthly pay. Encouraged by friends, he borrowed some money and purchased a restaurant across the street for $150. But only four months later he sold it to

[4] The translation of Portner's memoirs appears confused about the departure and arrival dates of the ship, claiming that the dates are July 3 and February 1, respectively. The dates are more believable in reverse, but the information from the ship's manifest has to be considered more credible as it was recorded at the time and not, like Portner's memoirs, begun sixteen years later and subsequently translated and transcribed. The Portners' arrival occurred more than two years prior to the opening of Castle Garden, New York City's first official immigrant receiving station.

[5] Two sources—one a posthumous secondary source, and another, a single building permit application not completed by Portner himself—give Robert Portner's middle initial as "A.," although he appears to have used no middle initial in his signature, and most sources are silent on the matter. If he had a middle name at all, the name August is a possibility, as it is a common enough German name and one frequent within the Portners' extended family. (Work Projects Administration 1941:121; District of Columbia Building Permits)

[6] The factory apparently manufactured items, such as combs and buttons, from animal bone, a cheap, easily worked and commonly used material, a "plastic" of its day.

[7] Portner and John N. Sigel did receive a patent for an improvement in waterproofing paper, but Sigel was credited as the inventor, and the patent application was dated 1864. (United States Patent and Trademark Office 1864)

lend his brother Carl money for a half share in a new pie bakery. Robert served as the bakery's bookkeeper and salesman. Carl's partner bought him out, but Robert remained with the firm six more months, into late 1857. At the time of Carl's death in 1873, he had still not paid back his younger brother—another lesson not lost on Robert. Like many recent immigrants and their fellow German-Americans, the Portners stuck together and supported each other, but Robert makes it clear that that support sometimes seemed a little too one-sided. (Portner n.d.:4,5)

A copy of a circa *1860s photograph of Robert Portner. The photograph is in the possession of the Portner family, and was reproduced with the translation of his memoirs.*

Robert desired independence from his brothers and found a home for himself at 148 Chambers Street. In the spring of 1858 he partnered with an acquaintance, a Swiss by the name of Nicholas Hoffman, and opened a café. The men were quite successful, but Hoffman left at the end of 1859 to marry an affluent widow and manage a business she owned. A few months later Portner sold the restaurant for $1,650 cash. Already with years of hard work behind him and memories of the difficult times of his youth, that pocket full of gold made Robert Portner feel like "the richest man in the world." With his newfound wealth he started a new enterprise, a liquor store at 272 Greenwich Street. (Portner n.d.:5-6; Wilson 1856; Wilson 1861; Wilson 1862)

He expected to stay settled a while. Robert was quickly assimilating into the culture of his adopted country. His English had improved immensely, and he took the oath of American citizenship October 20, 1859. He also became active in politics. Like many Northern, wage-earning, recent immigrants, Robert could identify with the young, anti-slavery, pro-industry Republican Party. He voted Republican in the November elections and, with the milestone 1860 campaign approaching, he set up a meeting place for the local Republican club and served as its secretary. Portner could not have known how the repercussions of that election would affect the course of his life and the history of the entire nation. (Portner n.d.:5-6; National Archives and Records Administration, Index to Naturalization Petitions)